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ABSTRACT

ALTHOUGH RESEARCH STUDIES HAVE FOUND YOUNG CHILDREN TO BE AWARE OF PATTERNS IN LANGUAGE, THIS INNATE POWER IS NOT BEING ENCOURAGED IN THEM DURING THEIR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS. IF THEY ARE TO GAIN CONTROL OF STRUCTURE IN THEIR WRITING AND TO UTILIZE VOCABULARY GAINED THROUGH READING EXPERIENCES, THEN A CAREFULLY PLANNED PROGRAM FOR SYNTAX STUDY IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IS ESSENTIAL. SUBJECTS THAT COULD BE COVERED ARE (1) UTILIZATION OF THE "TUNE" OF LANGUAGE TO RELATE RHYTHMIC AND SYNTACTICAL PATTERNS, (2) GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF BASIC SENTENCE PATTERNS, (3) METHODS OF SENTENCE EXPANSION ACHIEVED BY ADDING SYNTACTIC UNITS AND ELEMENTS OF SUBORDINATION, (4) TRANSFORMATION OF SENTENCES INTO PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS, QUESTIONS, NEGATIVE, OR EMPHATIC CONSTRUCTIONS, (5) DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE THROUGH AWARENESS OF THE POSSIBLE CHOICES OF EXPRESSION, (6) SENTENCE COORDINATION THROUGH PARALLELISM, BALANCE, AND ECONOMY OF WORDS, AND (7) SUBORDINATION TO SHOW THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF IDEAS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP. (MF)

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The Case for Syntax

Twice a year the teacher of freshman composition at *the* University—which may be Texas or California or Illinois or Wisconsin—faces a crop of young hopefuls, products of our many-faceted public and private school systems. Their formal training in the English language varies greatly, not merely from community to community but even from school to school and teacher to teacher. There is very little the freshman instructor can take for granted, except that this rather bewildered group of adolescents knows with the certainty of divine inspiration that there is a difference between *can* and *may* and that no decent sentence is ever begun with a conjunction or concluded with a preposition. These particular shibboleths of language have long been retired by the linguists. Yet they persist in the elementary and secondary textbooks, although the validity of this continuing assault is contradicted by scientific study.[1]

Much more laudable, of course, is the time devoted to word study. Students at all age levels find a certain fascination in the picturesque origins of many words, in the historical events which controlled the introduction of our Latin and Norman-French heritage, in the many foreign words which have found their way into English through exploration and colonization. Word lists, crossword puzzles, and dictionary exercises are but a few of the techniques used to help students build a wide vocabulary. Yet only infrequently are they encouraged to draw upon this hoard of meaning and use a "big" word in a syntactic structure; the wide gap between the recognition vocabulary and the working vocabulary remains.

The Neglect of Syntax

The negect of syntax is characteristic not only of our teaching but even of our literary criticism. In his recent book, *Language, a Science of Human Behavior,* Warfel says,

> There has been bred in us an excessive adoration of words and ignorance of or distaste for the systematic organization of words into syntax. If one follows Otto Jespersen in "Shakespeare and the Language of Poetry," Chapter X in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language,* the major element in the greatest of all English poets' works is words. The few references to the master's grammar and syntax are unperceptive . . . Jespersen, of course, was caught up in the late nineteenth century preoccupation with morphology ("the internal structure and forms of words"), so that he never quite saw the language system which makes possible the tension in words and meanings. Usage study is predicated upon the wholly false notion that words have the power to operate *sui generis,* as if the panes in a window exist apart from the frame. The three elements in a language—in descending order of importance—are the system or code, the tune, and the words . . . The "big" words are only as important as the system makes them.[2]

Today teachers of reading and literature tend to repeat Jespersen's error, concentrating their attention and that of their students on lexical matters and assuming that the syntax will take care of itself.

[1]See Margaret Bryant, *Current American Usage.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1962, p. 48 and pp. 162-64.

[2]Henry Warfel, *Language, a Science of Human Behavior.* Cleveland: H. Allen, 1962, p. 141.

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At a very early age children should see that words themselves can have only limited meaning without the language system. A simple word like *run*, for example, can mean: "They run down the street"; "it was a short run to school": "I have a run in my stocking." Grammar studies then should encompass much more than fragmented drills on words and their forms; they should at least attempt to show how the system operates.

Recent Language Studies

Recent studies in education and linguistics have shown that young children are capable of absorbing such instruction and have verified what parents of young children already know: that even the preschooler has caught on to the basic patterns of his language. Many of his amusing mistakes are thoroughly logical in the light of the system, as "Please higher my swing"; "I runned all the way home"; "It's not in my downer drawer." Before he appears at school for formal training, a child is able to generate his own sentences and to make simple transformations.[3] It seems a pity that this innate power is not immediately encouraged to develop.

Elementary school teachers are particularly fortunate to have available two recent studies on the language of school children: Walter D. Loban's *The Language of Elementary School Children*, published in 1963 by the National Council of Teachers of English, and Ruth G. Strickland's *The Language of Elementary School Children: Its Relationship to the Language of Reading Textbooks and the Quality of Reading of Selected Children*, published in 1962 by Indiana University. Both researchers have actually measured children's growth in manipulating syntactic structures, and their finding are significant to all teachers of the language.

One of Professor Loban's significant findings involves syntax. He discovered that although both his high group and his low group used the same general structural patterns, his high group was able to achieve greater flexibility within the pattern. For example, students in the high group used more structures of subordination, more nominals, more movable units.[4] The language skills of these gifted children might logically serve as some kind of a goal, for studies seem also to indicate that poor language skills are less related to intelligence than to environment.[5] The earlier the study of syntax is begun the less likely a child will become frozen in the syntactical patterns of his home environment.

The Strickland study points out that children at all age levels can expand and elaborate their sentences through movable units and elements of subordination.[6] Significantly, the study reveals that there appears to be no scheme for the development of control over sentence structure which parallels the generally accepted scheme for control over vocabulary.[7]

Suggested Procedures

What can the elementary school teacher do, then, in the absence of controlled teaching materials in the area of syntax? The answer to this rhetorical question is, "Possibly a great deal." The oral language that children use is structurally more advanced than that which they find in their books,[8] so little help can be expected there. But early work in oral and written composition will provide opportunity for the teacher to

[3]See Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 8.

[4]Loban, p. 84.
[5]*Ibid.*, p. 64.
[6]Strickland, p. 106.
[7]*Ibid.*, p. 104.
[8]*Ibid.*, p. 106.

examine the child's syntax. There are several points of departure.

Tune and Syntax

A logical beginning for the elementary school teacher could be the tune of language. Here a skillful teacher could make an easy approach from the work in reading, which seems to be divorced from the work in language. That this dichotomy does exist, even at the fourth-grade level, is unfortunate; for much of the work in the reading books, which seem to be more linguistically oriented than many of the language books, could be utilized to present an early introduction to syntax. For example, students in reading are asked to examine the rhythmic patterns of an English sentence by choosing between the following:

1. Once there was a king who behaved in a strange way.
2. Once there was a king who behaved in a strange way.

Intuitively, native speakers of English, even at the age of nine, will prefer sentence one. No one needs to know the elaborate interworking of the suprasegmental phonemes to understand that sentence one conforms to the basic patterns of the language. Once this point is established, children can quite easily see that the rhythmic patterns and the syntactical patterns are closely related. That is, sentence two would have to be rejected on two counts: the unnatural interruption in the main statement and the separation of a preposition from its object. Such an early introduction to syntax might prevent many problems in composition which persist through high school, such as the misplaced modifier and some of the perennial questions in the punctuation of nonrestrictive modifiers. Actually, sound and syntax can be used to reinforce one another, for surely a recognition of syntactic structures could also be useful in improving oral and silent reading.

Basic Patterns

When the student has reached the fifth or sixth grade he should be able to recognize that these intonational units which he has been calling sentences tend to pattern themselves into recurring structures which can be called "basic patterns," those simple, active statements of the language which are familiar to any native speaker. Grammatical analysis should logically begin here, rather than with parts of speech which represent a more complex phase of analysis and present more detailed problems. Further, the ability to spot-check each word in a sentence and give it a name does not help to improve either reading or writing skills. (Some of this formal analysis is even misleading. A seventh-grade language book, for example, in one place asks the student to identify the word *story* as a noun, as in "Tell me a story," and in another place as an adjective, as in "I have a storybook." Most grammarians today would prefer the term "noun adjunct" for the second use, though perhaps any distinction is relatively unimportant.)

Simply by examining the sentences in their reading books, students can see that there are five patterns that seem to recur with great frequency. It is useful to work with these basic patterns, though there is no certainty about the actual numbers of patterns possible for the English sentence. These declarative patterns can be designated as follows:

I.	N	V	
	Skaters	perform	
II.	N^1	V	N^2
	Cats	eat	fish
III.	N^1	V or *be*	N^1
	The boys	became	friends
	Father	is	a lawyer
IV.	N	V or *be*	Adj
	The doll	looks	pretty
	The doll	is	pretty

V.	N	*be*	Adv
	Mother	is	away

There is nothing sacred about the presentation of the formulas, but they demonstrate some simple observations about the sentences. First, the subjects remain the same, but the predicates differ in their relationships to the subjects. For example, in Pattern II, the noun in the predicate is numbered N^2 to indicate that it represents a distinct entity, while in Pattern III it is numbered N^1 to show that this pattern is, in effect, a grammatical equation and that the subject and the noun in the predicate have identical reference.

Sentence Expansion

After children are thoroughly familiar with these patterns and can write them easily, teachers can demonstrate how these patterns are readily expanded into the more complicated sentences which the children actually read and compose orally. Without getting technical about prepositional phrases, infinitives, or participles, a teacher can show that there are open points in the basic patterns where subordinate units can be inserted. For example, the first sentence, "Skaters perform," can be expanded by inserting modifiers before the subject, after the subject, before the verb, and after the verb.

> Every day graceful skaters, who belong to the girls' athletic club, skillfully perform on the school rink.

Students can now see that there are different kinds of modifiers, that there are several open points in a sentence, and that some of these modifiers can be shifted to several points; that is, they are movables. Thus the student is introduced to the idea of options. The sentence could read: "Graceful skaters, who belong to the girls' athletic club, every day perform skillfully on the school rink." This type of classroom demonstration is merely an inductive device to prove to children a fact which both the Strickland and Loban studies emphasize: at all age levels children can expand and elaborate their sentences through movable syntactic units and elements of subordination. The teacher's role is to bring to the conscious level something which children can do intuitively.

Transformations–Substitutions

Expanding the basic patterns is the easiest way of showing children how sentences structure. Another way is transformations. That is, these patterns can be manipulated or changed at will according to obligations or options. At this higher level of analysis, the more complex structures of language can be produced by rewriting. In other words, ideas can be expressed in different ways: as passive constructions, as questions, as negative or emphatic constructions. There is no need to develop the rather complicated rules of transformation which control these changes, for the native speaker already knows that he can make them. The important thing for the teacher is to make the child realize that he can perform these miracles at will, that he has, in effect, a genie's control over his language.

For example, Pattern II sentences occur most frequently in English, since they represent the actor–action–goal type of situation and are the only sentences which can be transformed into the passive. The sentence, "Cats eat fish," can be transformed as follows:

Fish is eaten by cats. (passive)
Do cats eat fish? (question-active)
Is fish eaten by cats? (question-passive)
Cats do eat fish. (emphatic)
Cats do not eat fish. (negative)
Don't cats eat fish? (negative question)
Cats are fish eaters. (Pattern III)

Substitutions and Style

This matter of substitution, or of learning to say things in different ways, is one of the most important aspects in developing style, which after all implies something individual or "chosen." Most writers in a given context will prefer one version to all others, but no one can choose unless he knows what his choices are. In English these are many and varied and in a degree involve morphemic as well as syntactic structures. One can say "the stealth of a cat" or "cat-like stealth"; "the laughter of girls" or "girlish laughter"; "the structure of a molecule" or "molecular structure."

The sentence, "To play tennis well requires frequent practice," can be restated as follows:

> Those who play tennis well practice frequently.
>
> Tennis is practiced frequently by those who play it well.
>
> Frequency of practice is required by those who play tennis well.

The teacher of composition may wince a little at the last two versions, but unfortunately students do write such sentences and they are syntactically sound. It is often a genuine insight for a youngster to learn that he can say the same idea somewhat more gracefully than in his first awkward attempt.

Three approaches to syntax have been suggested for the teachers of younger children: the relationship of syntax to sentence rhythms, sentence expansions, and substitutions. Older children, perhaps at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels, can be introduced to coordination and subordination as two additional methods of developing their sentences.

Transformations-Coordination

Young children employ coordination with *and* to such a degree that it may even sound superfluous to suggest that this can be a rather sophisticated way of manipulating sentences. It is, in fact, a characteristic of Hemingway's style and is used effectively to create certain tensions in meaning. Notice the coordination in the opening paragraph from *A Farewell to Arms:*

> Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and the leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling, and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

It is important to teach coordination as a method of syntax because it is basic to the rhetorical concepts of parallelism and balance. Actually, however, it is such a simple method that children have little difficulty in seeing how it works. First, it is important to demonstrate that any syntactic structure can be compounded, from the entire sentence to the single word functioning in a slot as subject, object, modifier, *etc.* Sometimes coordination is merely a question of addition, of linking two sentences:

> The trees are bare. The grass is brown. → The trees are bare, and the grass is brown.

At other times the process involves subtracting repeated words and linking like syntactic structures. (Arrows mean "rewrite as."

> Father was strict. Father was fair. Father was kind. → Father was strict, ~~and father was~~ fair, and ~~father~~ was kind.
>
> Father was strict, fair, and kind. *or* Father was strict, but fair and kind.
>
> The house was neat. The yard was neat. The barn was neat. → The house ~~was neat, and the~~ yard ~~was neat,~~ and the barn was neat.
>
> The house, yard, and barn were neat.

When similarly patterned sentences are linked together, chainlike, obvious repetitions are revealed. If these can be can-

celed, as the illustrations show, economy of expression results. Note that in the second group an obligatory change in the number of the verb takes place to restore concord between the now plural subject and the verb.

This process of addition and subtraction can, of course, take place anywhere in the sentence and can involve any structures. If students can see exactly what transformations are involved they may perhaps be spared the problem of faulty parallelism later. For example, the child who wrote, "We marked our puppy's grave with a wooden cross and covering the grave with flowers," could easily have avoided this sentence if he had seen it like this:

We marked our puppy's grave with a wooden cross.
We decorated our puppy's grave with flowers.
→ We marked our puppy's grave with a wooden cross and ~~we~~ covered ~~our puppy's~~ (the) grave with flowers.

Here we can substitute the noun determiner *the* for the possessive phrase. To avoid possible ambiguity, *grave* is repeated.

Transformations-Subordination

Coordination, then, can help writers to avoid repetition and redundancy and to achieve parallelism or balance in structure. Subordination, a more complicated type of transformation, shows the relative importance of ideas and maps out their relationship. Rhetorically, it helps by permitting variation in sentence openers and in the rhythmic patterns. The Loban study points out that the adverbial and noun clauses were used more frequently by the children studied than the adjective clause and that the use of subordinating connectors increased with age, ability, and socio-economic status.

Sentences transform into modifiers of nouns something like this:

The book was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland.*
which
~~The book~~ was in Father's coat pocket.
→ The book which was in Father's coat pocket was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland.*
or
The book in Father's coat pocket was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland.*

The first sentence is considered the consumer sentence, which has an open point between *book* and *was*. If the second sentence is to be inserted at this point, certain changes in syntax must be made to reduce the sentence to a subordinate position. This is done by the subsitution of *which* for the noun and its determiner, *the book*. Because the word order makes the relationship of ideas perfectly clear, the words, *which* and *was*, which carry little or no lexical meaning, can be eliminated in the second transformation and the input sentence finally has become a prepositional phrase.

Often sentences transform to modifiers of verbs simply by the addition of a subordinator which in a sense lowers the status of the word group from a sentence to a subordinate clause. It can be demonstrated like this:

We had to postpone our class picnic.
The weather turned cold very suddenly.
→ We had to postpone our class picnic because the weather (as / since / when) turned cold very suddenly.

The two separate sentences give no indication of the thought relationship between them. As soon as the subordinator *because* is introduced, the cause-to-effect relationship is immediately emphasized. Other subordinators indicate other relationships:

although, though (concession);
until, after, before, as, when, while, (time);
if, unless (condition); *so* (result).

Application to Composition

It is possible in the elementary school to introduce these methods of improving the composition of the sentence, for verbal youngsters somehow manage to employ these syntactic structures without much tutorial help. Here is a composition of a second grader:

> Georgia is a pet mouse. We feed her cornflower seeds and dried out corn. We change her water in the morning and night. We put her cage in my dad's workshop. At night we let her run on the workbench. She loves to take my dad's nails. When she gets a nail in her mouth, she runs to the back of her cage. Then she drops it. After my dad puts her back in her cage he has to pick up all the nails. When you pick her up you feel a lot of pricks because she has such little claws.

Notice here that the young writer possibly tired of the subject opener, especially of the repetition of *we*. Then he began with a prepositional phrase, *at night*. Three of the sentences begin with adverbial clauses which sound idiomatic and unforced but which certainly vary the rhythmic pattern. The last sentence contains two adverbial clauses. A child who can intuitively or imitatively write such sentences at the age of seven or eight should certainly be exposed to the study of syntactic structures at the elementary level. The increasing control of structure may then enable him to use the vocabulary he has gained in his reading experience. And children who are less gifted verbally deserve some help in developing their power over language.

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